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VII. — *An Analysis of the Pagan Revival of the Late Fourth Century, with Especial Reference to Symmachus*

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THE final triumph of Christianity in the city of Rome was prefaced during the latter half of the fourth century of our era by a remarkable display of interest in the forms of belief and worship which were most antagonistic to the new faith. This revival, in so far as the epigraphical evidence warrants us in making a statement, centred in the Oriental cults; hence a study of the general movement concerns these cults more directly than any other manifestation of pagan belief.

I have shown elsewhere,¹ and I believe sufficiently clearly, that datable inscriptions dealing with the Oriental cults cease to appear throughout the entire Western Roman world, if we take into consideration the provinces alone, at approximately the year 250 A.D. While this statement holds true for the entire empire outside of the capital city, Rome itself presented entirely different phenomena. Many years after the last inscriptions to the Eastern divinities had been dedicated in the provinces, such dedications were sufficiently numerous at Rome, particularly so during the closing years of the fourth century, when the pagan revival reached its culmination.

On examining the causes for this situation, the obvious suggestion immediately presents itself that the renewed interest in the old forms of belief was due primarily to the influences set in motion by Julian the Apostate and the impetus which he gave to the movement for the perpetuation of the pagan cults, but such a supposition fails to grasp the inner significance of the events of the second half of the fourth century.

As has been pointed out by Wissowa,² the Neoplatonism

¹ In a thesis presented at Harvard University in 1911, in candidacy for the Doctorate of Philosophy and entitled: *Quibus temporibus religiones ab Oriente ortae et Romae et in provinciis Romanis floruerint desierintque quaeritur.*

² Wissowa, *Religion u. Kultus d. Römer*², 96.

so warmly espoused by Julian was almost as far removed from the old Roman belief as was Christianity, and Julian, although referred to as the restorer of the Roman religion,³ does not in reality stand at the opposite pole from Constantine, the one responsible for the overthrow of many old Roman institutions.⁴ Julian, no matter what his own views on the subject may have been, was in reality far removed from the traditional modes of thought of the old Roman state religion. Paganism received, to be sure, some brief comfort, not to mention temporal aid, from the Apostate,⁵ but the assistance he rendered the pagan cause is in itself no adequate explanation of the marked pagan revival of the late fourth century.

Before considering more minutely this revival itself and the elements which united to compose it, we should consider for a moment the general form of pagan ideas and belief at this period. Religious syncretism had by this time performed an almost complete work, and the tendencies toward a syncretistic form of thought which were clearly manifest as early as the time of Apuleius,⁶ and so adequately expressed in the well-known passage in the *Metamorphoses*⁷ dealing with the all-pervading power of Isis, had now reached their complete development. The result was distinctly pantheistic in its general character, but was marked by a lack of clearness of outline and a certain indefiniteness of statement. The old divinities of the Roman pantheon had to a certain extent blended with those of foreign extraction, while at the same time most of the outward forms and institutions of the Roman religion remained unimpaired.⁸ To this ancient background had been added the ritual observances of the Oriental cults and the different mysteries which formed so central a part of

³ Vid. *C.I.L.* VIII, 4326, restitutori * Ro[manae] religionis.

⁴ Vid. *Amm. Marc.* XXI, 10, 8: Tunc et memoriam Constantini, ut novatoris turbatorisque priscarum legum et moris antiquitus recepti, vexavit, etc. This passage refers primarily to civil rather than religious institutions.

⁵ Cf. Seeck, *Geschichte d. Untergangs d. antiken Welt*, v, ch. 9, *passim*.

⁶ *Ca.* 150 A.D.

⁷ XI, 5.

⁸ An excellent example of this is found in the public maintenance of the worship of Vesta as late as about 350 A.D. Vid. Wissowa, *op. cit.* 97, n. 1.

those Eastern forms of worship. Such, in brief, were the general religious conditions at Rome, in so far as paganism was concerned, during the period with which we have to deal.

The first fact that appears on examination of the forces which brought about the late pagan revival is the extremely important part played in the movement by the devotees of the Oriental cults, to which allusion has already been made.⁹ The real opponents of the progress of Christianity were those who were deeply interested in the cults of Isis, Mithras, or the Magna Mater, to mention only the more prominent of the Eastern religions. The Christian writers refer without emotion and with only a touch of scorn to the gods of the old pantheon, whose power to hold the sincere belief of the multitudes had passed away,¹⁰ but an entirely different tone is evident when reference is made to the Oriental cults and to their devotees.¹¹ There can be no question but that the main strength of the pagan revival was supplied primarily by the Oriental religions, especially those whose mysteries, like those of the Magna Mater, were intended to reveal the means by which the devotee might obtain cleansing from sin.

Passing on to consider somewhat in detail the type of devotees who were leaders in this movement, an examination of the inscriptions reveals the fact that almost all the dedicants were individuals of distinction and prominence in the state, to such a degree indeed that the movement under discussion might justly be called an aristocratic one. This is in marked contradiction to the conditions which prevailed in the earlier period, when many of the devotees of these cults, especially at the time of their introduction and shortly thereafter, belonged to the lower ranks of society.¹² There is scarcely an inscription of this later period which is not dedicated by a *vir clarissimus*.¹³ All these inscriptions are very complete

⁹ Vid. p. 87.

¹⁰ Vid. Wissowa, *op. cit.* 95.

¹¹ Cf. the remarks of Firmicus Maternus on Isis, the Magna Mater, the Dea Caelestis and Mithras in his *De errore profanarum religionum*.

¹² Vid. Wissowa, *op. cit.* 352, 359, 369.

¹³ Inscriptions *C.I.L.* vi, 498, 499, 500, 501, 503, 504, 509, 510, 511, 512, 749, 750, 751 a and b, 752, 753, 754, 1675, are all dedicated by *viri clarissimi*. vi, 502 is dedicated by the daughter of a *vir clarissimus*. The only inscriptions not

and definite in regard to the character of the dedicants and afford interesting information in regard to the devotees of the Eastern religions at this period. Among the dedicants are found a man who had been proconsul of Africa and city prefect,¹⁴ who is probably to be identified with the Caesarius who was *comes rerum privatarum* in 364 A.D.; another who was a *duodecimbyr urbis Romae*;¹⁵ a third who is thus described: *causarum non ignobilis Africani tribunalis orator et in consistorio principum item magister libellor(um) et cognition(um)sacrarum, magister epistular(um), magister memoriae, vicarius praefector(um) per Hispanias vice s(acra) c(ognoscens)*;¹⁶ while still another was: *v(ir) c(larissimus) et inlust[is] ex vicario Asie et Ceioni Rufi Volusiani v(iri) c(larissimi) et inlust[is] ex prefecto [pre]torio et ex prefecto ur[bi] et Cecine Lolliane clar[issi]me et inlust[is] femin[e], deae Isidis sacerdotis fi[lius]*.¹⁷

It might be argued from many of these inscriptions that, in so far as they present a true picture of the religious conditions of Rome during this period, they prove the survival of the older forms of the Roman religion and that it is therefore unfair to adduce them as proof that the pagan revival really centred in the Oriental cults. For example, the Antoninus of *C.I.L.* VI, 498 was not only a devotee of the Great Mother but also pontifex and *XV vir sacris faciundis*; Q. Clodius Flavianus (*ib.* 501) was a *pontifex maior*, a *XV vir sacris faciundis*, and a *septem vir epulorum*; while L. Ragonius Venustus (*ib.* 503) was *augur publicus* and *pontifex Vestalis maior*, to mention only certain instances.¹⁸ The survival to a certain extent of the older Roman forms of religious worship is undeniably proved by these inscriptions, but at the

clearly so dedicated are VI, 736 (probably spurious) and VI, 30, 966 (possibly spurious in part).

¹⁴ *C.I.L.* VI, 499.

¹⁵ VI, 500.

¹⁶ VI, 510.

¹⁷ VI, 512. Cf. also 1675; and 1778 and 1779, which recount the offices held by Vettius Agorius Praetextatus.

¹⁸ Cf. also VI, 499, where the Oriental devotee is *XV vir s. f.*; 504, *augur publicus, archibucolus dei Liberi, hierofanta Hecatæ*; 509, *pontifex maior, XV vir s. f.*; 510, *hierofanta Hecatæ(um), dei Liberi archibucolus*; 511, *p(ontifex) m(aior), hierof(anta) d(eae) Hecat(ae), aug(ur) pub(licus)*.

same time emphasis should be placed upon the following fact, namely, that none of the inscriptions mentioned above or others like them was set up by the dedicant in his capacity as a worshipper of any of the old Roman divinities, but in every instance because of special devotion to the Oriental cults. This assertion, which possibly may appear rather sweeping, is amply supported by the inscriptions themselves. Usually¹⁹ the purpose of the inscription is to commemorate the rite of the taurobolium which had been received by the dedicant, and in all of these inscriptions the mention of the other forms of worship with which the dedicant was more or less connected is wholly secondary and subsidiary. It is significant in the extreme that we do not find datable inscriptions of this period dedicated to the gods of the old Roman pantheon, but rather those alone which were inspired by devotion to the Oriental religions.

It has now been shown that the ultimate strength of the pagan revival rested with the Oriental cults, and on the basis of the evidence thus far adduced the question might well be raised whether the history of the Oriental cults during the second half of the fourth century does not coincide absolutely with that of the pagan revival, and further, whether the evidences of the survival of such forms of the old Roman state religion as those to which reference has already been made²⁰ are merely of slight importance, if not indeed wholly negligible in a careful estimate of the religious forces which combined to produce the conditions of the period.

Reasonable as this suggestion might at first appear, certain indications seem to point clearly to the contrary. We know, for instance, as has been previously stated, that in spite of imperial disapproval, some of the old rites were retained up to a late date, or even revived. This indication is good as far as it goes, but a much more exact picture of the period is

¹⁹ vi, 754 is, of course, an exception, being connected with the dedication of a temple. The Mithraic inscriptions, vi, 749-754, deal only with that cult and have no reference to the old Roman religion.

²⁰ Vid. p. 88; cf. n. 8.

furnished us by the career of Symmachus, one of the most distinguished members of the aristocratic pagan party.

Q. Aurelius Symmachus was born about the year 340 A.D. of a prominent family. His career is described in the inscription (*C.I.L.* vi, 1699): Eusebii . . . Q. Aur(elio) Symmacho v(iro) c(larissimo), quaest(ori), praet(ori), pontifici maiori, correctori Lucaniae et Brittiorum, comiti ordinis tertii, procons(uli) Africae, praef(ecto) urb(i), co(n)s(uli) ordinario, oratori disertissimo, Q. Fab(ius) Memm(ius) Symmachus v(ir) c(larissimus) patri optimo. As the life of Symmachus was spent in the midst of political affairs, and there was scarcely any movement of the time in which he did not have a part, a study of his relation to the pagan revival will help to explain certain conditions and tendencies of the period which might otherwise remain somewhat obscure.

The material for such a study is supplied chiefly by the works of Symmachus himself, as presented to us both in the *Epistulae* and in the *Relationes*.²¹

Even a casual study of those writings convinces one that Symmachus was genuinely religious. His letters are full of expressions which indicate his belief in the power of the gods to fulfil his desires and grant his requests, and to this end he continually invokes their aid. These expressions, while not very important in themselves when considered separately, are, however, certainly numerous enough in the aggregate to show the man's turn of mind. For example, we frequently find expressions like *Quod superest, deos quaeso, ut nos plenos gaudii quam primum revisas*,²² or *Dii modo optata fortunent, salutem reipublicae in solido locent*!²³ or *Diis me hercule, ut praefatus sum, deleganda est huius incerti administratio; hominum autem remedia diu dissimulata iam sera sunt*.²⁴

In addition are those expressions which are more casual in their nature, such as *An si nobis scribenda sit forensis oratio*,

²¹ The authoritative edition of the works of Symmachus is that of O. Seeck (Berlin, 1883), published in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, vi (1).

²² *Epist.* i, 50, 2.

²³ *Ib.* i, 57.

²⁴ *Ib.* ii, 6, 2. Other similar instances are: i, 73; ii, 3; 7, 3; ii, 45; 47; 48, 2; 50; 52, 2; 55, 2; 59, 2; iii, 15, 2; 24, 1; iv, 54, 1; v, 2; 13; 20, 2; vi, 75; vii, 21; 68; viii, 14; 23, 1; 69; ix, 39.

*Iovem deosque ceteros Catonis lege praefabimur, ne nobis vitio detur vel negligentia antiquitatis vel inscitia?*²⁵ Besides these polytheistic expressions, we find numerous evidences of the pantheistic trend of the period in general expressions like *Dehinc, si adiutu dei optata processerint, Capuam paramus excurrere*; ²⁶ or *Quod superest itineri, spero praefata dei venia sine labore peragendum*; ²⁷ or *Dei nutus efficiet ut super hoc etiam divini principis concordet auctoritas*.²⁸ There are in addition numerous more general expressions frequently tending to the pantheistic rather than polytheistic form of expression. Such are the following: *praestabit divina miseratio*; ²⁹ *opitulatio divina praestabit*; ³⁰ and *Quae iam divina ope ad plenam sanitatem coepit emergere*.³¹

To test the views of Symmachus on another point let us turn to the realm of the superstitious, the belief in portents and omens, and we shall find him to have been a firm believer in this phase of the old Roman religion. He writes in great distress to his friend Praetextatus, himself an active champion of the pagan faith,³² about a certain portent which had recently occurred. Numerous expiatory rites had been performed with small result, and further measures seemed necessary, regarding the success of which Symmachus promises to inform his friend.³³ In another letter,³⁴ addressed to certain of his relatives, he speaks of the dismay produced in the city by serious omens, only one of which he proceeds to describe and that only with apologies, for fear that even the narration of the omen may prove inauspicious. On the birthday of the city, he says, while the consul suffectus was being

²⁵ *Epist.* III, 44, 2.²⁶ II, 26, 1.²⁷ IV, 69. Similar instances are: IV, 14; VI, 19; 68; VII, 14; 46, 2; VIII, 47; IX, 22; 137; *Laud. in Val.* II, 18.²⁸ VI, 33.²⁹ *Ib.* v, 90.³⁰ VI, 32.³¹ VII, 80. For similar expressions vid. II, 53; VIII, 13; 18; 47; 71; 72; IX, 12; 24, 1; 72; 73.³² Cf. Macrobian. *Sat.* I, 7, 17; II, 1; 17, 1.³³ *Epist.* I, 49: *Impendio angor animi, quod sacrificiis multiplicibus et per singulas potestates saepe repetitis necdum publico nomine Spoletinum piatur ostentum. Nam et Iovem vix propitiavit octava mactatio, et Fortunae publicae multiugis hostiis nequiquam undecimus honor factus est.*³⁴ *Ib.* VI, 40, 1.

borne along in a triumphal procession, the horses became unmanageable and threw the consul out of the chariot, as a result of which the consul, adorned with the *palmata* and the consular insignia, was picked up suffering from a broken leg.

The next point to be considered is the relation sustained by Symmachus to the Oriental cults. He numbered among his friends enthusiastic devotees of these religions,³⁵ and as many of the aristocratic pagan party were followers of the Eastern cults, we might naturally expect Symmachus to have associated himself with his friends in their devotion to these forms of worship. In actual fact we have practically no evidence that he did so, and even the reverse seems likely to have been the true state of affairs. In the inscription above quoted (vi, 1699), where the distinctions of Symmachus are enumerated, there is only one reference to his holding any priesthood and that is the office of *pontifex maior*. This is in strong contrast to the inscription in memory of Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, where all of his priesthoods are named (vi, 1779): augur, pontifex Vestae, pontifex Sol(is), quindecimvir, curialis Herculis, sacratus Libero et Eleusiniis, hierophanta, neocorus, tauroboliatus, pater patrum. In all probability if Symmachus had been connected with the Oriental cults, the fact would have been mentioned in an inscription on a monument erected in his honor by his son. Aside from the evidence of this inscription, there are few references to his holding any priesthood, in spite of the vast volume of his correspondence. The few references that we do have deal apparently with the old Roman office of pontifex rather than the sacerdotal duties in any of the newer cults.

In one of his letters³⁶ he refers to the necessity of returning to Rome to attend to his priestly duties, for if he failed to do so, his absence would be felt. In earlier times, he says, such a duty could readily have been delegated to another, but now it is hard to find a substitute, for neglect of the sacrifices

³⁵ Among them (to cite only a single example) was Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, to whom reference has already been made. He was *hierophanta*, *neocorus*, *tauroboliatus*, *pater patrum*, and *pontifex Solis* (C.I.L. vi, 1779).

³⁶ *F. pist.* i, 51.

seems to be a road to political advancement. Elsewhere³⁷ he speaks of the discussion among the priests which resulted in delegating certain of their duties to the citizens, as a result of which the ceremonies were performed in a more lavish manner than usual. In this connection he expresses the conviction that the favor of a superior Power is lost if not cultivated by worship. In another letter³⁸ he apologizes for his silence by pleading his occupation with the duties of the priesthood in which he was engrossed. In concluding this letter he jestingly says that unless his friend replies he will exercise over him the authority of the priest.

Returning to the relation of Symmachus to the Oriental cults, we find that scarcely anywhere in his writings are any of these religions mentioned at all, and wherever an allusion may be interpreted as referring to the Oriental cults, we have no proof whatever that it proves the personal interest of Symmachus himself. He writes to Flavianus,³⁹ saying that he had been expecting his return to the city on account of the approaching festival of the Magna Mater, but this reference does not connect him personally in any way with the cult of that goddess, whose worship had in any case been received so long into the state religion that it is scarcely to be classed with that of Isis or of Mithras.⁴⁰

The following letter,⁴¹ addressed to Flavianus, is open to different interpretations: *Fungeris boni fratris officio, sed desine memorem commonere. Notae nobis sunt caerimoniae deorum et festa divinitatis imperata. Nisi forte me solum exequi vicem tuam postulas, et ut adsolet res divina mandari, mihi tuum munus iniungis. Fruere deliciis copiosis; nos mandata curabimus. Sed memento exactis feriis participes facere luxuriae tuae, quos tantopere laborasti consortes habere ieiunii.* The festival to which reference is here made is uncertain. It may possibly have been the *ieiunium Cereris*,⁴² or

³⁷ *Epist.* 1, 46, 2.³⁸ 1, 47, 1.³⁹ 11, 34.⁴⁰ Vid. Wissowa, *op. cit.* 317 ff.; and the literature there cited. The passage in Symmachus, *Laud. in Val.* 11, 32, referring to the Magna Mater is of no value as an expression of interest on the part of Symmachus in the worship of that goddess.⁴¹ *Epist.* 11, 53.⁴² Vid. Wissowa, *op. cit.* 301.

on the other hand it may refer to some fast in connection with the Oriental cults.⁴³ The only other place where the Oriental religions are even suggested are four instances where Symmachus uses the word *mystagogus* metaphorically. It will suffice to quote one example: Quin immo uberis gratiae instar accepi, quod amicitiae meae v.c. Scipio te mystagogo usus accessit.⁴⁴ Possibly the word has no particular importance and is used merely in a derived sense, yet on the other hand it may signify a familiarity with the pagan mysteries of the time which centred in the Oriental cults, though by no means unknown to other forms of belief.⁴⁵ Such is the evidence, slight as it is, which connects Symmachus with the Oriental forms of worship.

When we consider the relation of Symmachus to the Roman state religion we find a different situation, for his belief in the old gods seems genuine and his interest in the perpetuation of their worship is frequently expressed and clearly sincere. In a letter to Agorius Praetextatus,⁴⁶ he bewails the state of neglect into which the Romans had permitted their ancient worship to fall, and in another⁴⁷ he laments over the decay of Roman religion to which he attributes the scarcity of the grain supply in words that clearly express his real feelings: Dii patrii, facite gratiam neglectorum sacrorum! Miseram famem pellite! Quamprimum revocet urbs nostra quos invita dimisit! Again, writing to Helpidius,⁴⁸ he urges him to come and celebrate with him the festival of Minerva, which he feels sure his friend will remember on account of the school holidays of his boyhood which occurred at the time of this festival.

Yet again, he speaks of leaving his suburban villa on the Via Appia in order to attend the festival of Vesta in the city.⁴⁹ The interest of Symmachus in the cult of Vesta did not end with being present at her festival, for he was very

⁴³ Cf. Wissowa, 356 and n. 11 on the same page.

⁴⁴ *Epist.* v, 64. The other instances are vi, 25, vii, 45 and ix, 9.

⁴⁵ Cf. *C.I.L.* vi, 1779, for the mysteries of Ceres at Eleusis and of Hecate at Aegina, which were still in vogue at this period.

⁴⁶ *Epist.* i, 51.

⁴⁷ *Ib.* ii, 7, 3.

⁴⁸ v, 85, 3.

⁴⁹ ii, 59, 1.

zealous for the maintenance of the purity of her worship, with which he was connected in his capacity as pontifex. We find him writing to a Vestal and asking for information in regard to her intentions. A rumor had spread abroad that she desired to leave the priesthood before the age established by law, and he desires to have her authenticate or deny the report. The reply was evidently satisfactory, as far as we can judge from a second letter⁵⁰ written after he had received the Vestal's reply. On another occasion⁵¹ it was proved that one Primigenia, a Vestal at Alba, had been guilty of disloyalty to her vows with one Maximus, and Symmachus asks that the traditional punishment be inflicted on the guilty parties. A second letter⁵² treats the same case, but one may reasonably doubt whether the penalty usually employed in such cases was actually carried out.

The reference, again, to Symmachus in the *Carmen contra Paganos*⁵³ shows that he erected or repaired a temple to Flora as a condition of receiving an inheritance, left him apparently by his friend, Nicomachus Flavianus.⁵⁴

We now come to a still more important phase of the subject, and one on which much stress may justly be laid, if we want to fully comprehend the relation of Symmachus to the Roman state religion. I refer to the famous contest with regard to the altar of Victory in the senate house, a contest in which Symmachus appeared in the guise of protagonist of the old Roman faith. The facts of the case were briefly as follows.⁵⁵ Under Valentinian and the earlier part of the reign of Gratian the practice of the pagan cults was in no way interfered with by the emperors. Shortly before the close of Gratian's reign,⁵⁶ however, all public authority was

⁵⁰ IX, 109.⁵¹ IX, 147.⁵² IX, 148.⁵³ Vid. Baehrens, *P.L.M.* III, 286 ff.⁵⁴ *Ib.* II. 112-114,

Sola tamen gaudet meretrix te consule Flora
 ludorumque turpis genetrix Venerisque magistra
 composuit templum nuper cui Symmachus heres.

⁵⁵ I follow Seeck here. Vid. *op. cit.* liii ff. For a very extended treatment of the whole subject vid. Boissier, *La Fin du Paganisme*, II, 231-291.

⁵⁶ Vid. Ambros. *Epist.* I, 17, 10; also 5; cf. 16.

taken away from these rites and the money previously appropriated for the ritual expenses was diverted, part to the privy purse of the emperor and a part to the treasury of the praetorian prefects;⁵⁷ the donations formerly given to the Vestals and the assistants of the priests were assigned to political uses;⁵⁸ and in addition to sundry other regulations it was ordered that the altar of Victory, as a symbol of the pagan cult, should be removed from the senate house.⁵⁹ The senate, in part at least, was greatly aroused by this action, and as the pagans formed a majority in that body,⁶⁰ a deputation headed by Symmachus, was sent to the emperor to protest against his recent decree. The Christian senators countered this move by sending a petition through Damasus, bishop of Rome, to Ambrose who in turn presented it to the emperor, with the result that not even an audience was granted to the pagan mission.⁶¹

Gratian died in the following year, 383, a fact which the pagans charged to the emperor's impiety.⁶² The pagan party at court took on added strength with Vettius Agorius Praetextatus and Symmachus holding the offices of praefectus praetorio and praefectus urbi respectively.

After Praetextatus had entered upon office he secured the enactment of an imperial decree that the city prefect should investigate all cases where public adornments of the city had been turned to private uses and in such cases to require restitution.⁶³ This edict was aimed particularly at those who had despoiled temples. The pagans, elated by these successes, sought further concessions and in the summer of 384 the senate requested the emperor to abrogate the decree of Gratian and restore the former religious status at Rome. Symmachus supported this petition as strenuously as was in his power,⁶⁴ but the representations and threats of Ambrose

⁵⁷ Vid. Symm. *Rel.* III, 7; cf. Ambros. *Epist.* I, 17, 3.

⁵⁸ Vid. Symm. *ib.* 15; cf. Ambros. I, 18, 3.12.13.

⁵⁹ Vid. Symm. *Rel.* 3; cf. Ambros. I, 9, 14; I, 18, 1.7. 10.31.

⁶⁰ But cf. Boissier, *op. cit.* II, 271-272.

⁶¹ Symm. *Rel.* I, 20; Ambros. *ib.* I, 17, 10.

⁶² Symm. *Rel.* 19. ⁶³ Symm. *ib.* XXI, 3, 5.

⁶⁴ *Ib.* III *passim*.

prevented the emperor from yielding to the pagan party. Symmachus soon found himself in difficulty on account of the hostility of the Christians, which he had brought upon himself by the part he had taken in the matter and was severely rebuked by the emperor.⁶⁵ He defended himself most successfully but at the very moment of his triumph was dismayed by the sudden death of his friend and supporter Praetextatus, and asked permission to resign his office.⁶⁶ Such are the main facts of the case in regard to the altar of Victory in so far as Symmachus was directly concerned, but it is necessary to consider his views somewhat more in detail concerning the cult of Vesta and the altar of Victory, to see more exactly how a representative pagan of the period felt; for the position of Symmachus may be taken as typical of that of many aristocratic pagans of the time for whom he serves as spokesman.

The views of Symmachus are most fully expressed in the third *Relatio* where he protests to Valentinian about the recent edicts withdrawing state support from the Vestals. His main argument is as follows: The former religious status at Rome should be reestablished and the altar of Victory restored to its place. If the altar is removed, it will be inauspicious, and besides, what divine sanction will the senate and its proceedings enjoy if the statue is gone? A Higher Power pervades all things, to be sure, but the visible presence of divinity is a safeguard not to be neglected. Religion is a personal affair and one should admit the possibility of personal preferences in such a matter; different religions furthermore are assigned by divine will to different peoples. All divine matters being difficult of comprehension, tradition and past blessings, vouchsafed through long years by the gods to whom men have been faithful, supply the best criterion of truth. If the Romans therefore achieved greatness by serving the gods of ancient Rome, how can their descendants improve upon their example? All religion is in reality one; what difference does it make by which road one approaches the truth?

⁶⁵ Symm. *Rel.* XXI, 2.

⁶⁶ *Ib.* x, 2, 3.

Turning to the question of state support of the Vestals, Symmachus argues as follows: The funds formerly appropriated for the support of Vesta's worship should be restored once more to their former uses; the Vestals lead a life of simplicity and devotion to the Roman state for whose prosperity they invoke the divine aid, and such a life merits a proper reward. Our neglect of the Vestals has brought down the punishment of heaven and caused the scarcity of the harvests. Protect the sacred institutions of all religions, especially those that have proved valuable in the past. In this third *Relatio* Symmachus appears in the light of an intense conservative, clinging to the old institutions because of a sincere belief in their proved excellence, but largely also because of their very antiquity.

As regards the courteous tone of his words it might be argued that political expediency led to the utterance of the conciliatory views which he voices in this *Relatio*, but it should be noted on this point that Symmachus, though an active champion of his own views, was a courteous opponent. Not only have we the statements of the present *Relatio* to guide us but also other passages where he refers even more directly to his opponents, the Christians. He refers to Damasus, bishop of Rome, as a *vir laudabilis*.⁶⁷ On another occasion he wrote a letter warmly commending the action of a bishop named Clemens and in order to forestall criticism of his approval of a man of the opposite party, he takes the pains to say that he approves of the man, not of his religion, making clear all the while the admiration he felt for the man himself in spite of differences of belief.⁶⁸ On still another occasion we find him giving a letter of introduction to the bishop Severus whom he praises in the warmest terms.⁶⁹ The most notable proof however that Symmachus conducted his warfare with courtesy lies in the series of letters addressed by him to Ambrose,⁷⁰ the foremost champion at that period of the Christian faith and his antagonist in the question of the altar of Victory. Both men supported forcibly their own views as a matter of personal belief and of conscience, but

⁶⁷ Symm. *Rel.* XXI, 6.⁶⁸ *Epist.* I, 64.⁶⁹ *Ib.* VII, 51.⁷⁰ *Ib.* III, 30-37.

they were not in any sense hostile in their private relations in so far as we are able to discover.

The third *Relatio* of Symmachus whose contents we have been treating in such detail, is of great value from many points of view, but above all because it expresses the ideas, not of a single man, but of an influential group. For this group Symmachus speaks when he expresses heartfelt devotion and genuine attachment to the belief of his fathers. This basic belief stands out continually in all his writings and is the keynote of his whole position. He gave undivided allegiance to the old Roman religious system with its auguries, its Vestals and its sacred festivals. It was not the lure of the mystic rites of the Oriental cults that attracted him; neither the elaborate ritual of Isis nor the bloody bath of the taurobolium seem to have exercised on him their appeal; what held him were the rites made sacred through generations of Roman history. His thought, to be sure, was moulded by the tendencies of a later age; some of his forms of religious expression would have sounded strange in the ears of a contemporary of Cicero, but at heart he was a pagan of the old school.

I have tried to analyze the main tendencies of pagan thought and practice which culminated in the pagan revival of the late fourth century, and have endeavored to point out that this movement was not simple in its nature, but rather a complex whole made up of certain tendencies which, though to a certain extent inharmonious, united to express themselves in active opposition to Christianity. Prominent among the leaders of this movement, aristocratic rather than popular in its nature, were the devotees of the Oriental cults, who felt that Christianity had no vital message for them; and on the other hand, at times distinct, at times merging with them, stood the body of those loyal and zealous conservatives, adherents of the earlier forms of Roman worship, firm in a desire that these rites should be maintained, chief among whom and typical of whom above all others stands Q. Aurelius Symmachus.